

ALTERNATIVES TO THE HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

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BY

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According to the California Department of Education, the goals of the California High School Exit Examination are four-fold:

*The primary purpose of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) is to significantly improve pupil achievement in public high schools and to ensure that pupils who graduate from public high schools can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. The CAHSEE helps identify students who are not developing skills that are essential for life after high school and encourages districts to give these students the attention and resources needed to help them achieve these skills during their high school years.*¹

Thus, policies associated with the implementation of the CAHSEE, including appropriate alternative measures, should be evaluated based on their likelihood of improving overall student achievement – both by keeping students in school to increase what they learn and by improving their instruction through targeted attention and resources –as well as their ability to measure “grade level competency.”

I. Creating a Valid Assessment System

In order to meet professional testing standards, as outlined in the national *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, the State must consider alternative measures to augment the information provided by the CAHSEE, and these alternatives should also comply with these standards. The standards state that a decision having a major impact on a student should not be made on the basis of a single test score and that other sources of information should be taken into account.² The standards note that an on-demand test taken in a limited period of time on a single day cannot measure all that is important for students to know and be able to do. A credible accountability system must rest on assessments that are balanced and comprehensive with respect to state standards. Additional indicators such as grades, teacher evaluations, collections of student work, coursework and performance assessments – listed by the Standards as important adjuncts to test scores – are important not only for reasons of

¹ California Department of Education, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/overview.asp>.

² American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council of Measurement in Education, *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999), p. 146.

validity and fairness in making decisions, but also to assess important skills that a single standardized test cannot measure.

The standards also outline the kinds of testing alternatives that should be made available for English language learners and students with disabilities, which California's current CAHSEE policy does not provide. As the Standards for Testing explain:

A standardized test that has been designed for use with the general population may be inappropriate for use for individuals with specific motor, language, or psychological skills that are affected by the disability and that are not relevant to the focal construct.³

Test norms based on native speakers of English whose first language is not English should not be used with individuals whose first language is not English or such individuals' test results should be interpreted as reflecting in part current level of English proficiency rather than ability, potential, aptitude.⁴

The National Academy of Sciences also notes that an assessment should be able to determine "whether a students' performance on a test reflects knowledge and skill based on appropriate instruction or is attributable to poor instruction or to such factors as language barriers or disabilities unrelated to the skills being tested." Because test validity rests in the inference a test-user seeks to make from a test result, a test that is valid for some populations of students may be invalid for others.

It is for this reason that virtually all states have developed alternative assessments for students with disabilities, and many states either test students in their native language (for example, New York, New Jersey, Texas) or exempt them from standardized tests until they are English proficient, sometimes substituting alternatives such as portfolio assessments (e.g. Arkansas, Maine) or other alternative assessments (e.g. Indiana, Montana, Nebraska, Texas). Some states, such as Illinois and Wisconsin, have developed special assessments for English language learners.

California's current CAHSEE policy is out of step with policies in most other states that use exit exams. California is virtually the only exit exam state that has not approved appropriate alternatives or exemptions for English language learners or students with disabilities. A recent Stanford University study found that, among the 20 states with high school examinations, most include multiple measures of performance as the basis for the graduation decision.⁵ A number of alternatives have been adopted by states as means for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in addition to the use of a high school exit examination. These are summarized in a number of recent national

³ *Standards*, p. 101.

⁴ *Standards*, p.91.

⁵ Linda Darling Hammond, Elle Rustique-Forrester, & Ray Pecheone, *Multiple Measures Approaches to High School Graduation*, Stanford School Redesign Network (2005), http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/mm/pdf/multiple_measures.pdf.

reports⁶ and include a range of alternative assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners, as well as alternative measures for all students, such as:

- Alternative tests (college entry examinations, AP tests, military entrance examinations, and tests offered in students' native languages);
- Coursework that reflects state learning standards;
- Locally developed performance assessments, including portfolios, senior projects, student work samples, and performance tasks;
- State-developed performance assessments, including performance tasks and student work samples scored using state rubrics.

Each of these approaches can be constructed to represent and assess state learning standards at grade level competency, as desired by the goals for the CAHSEE. Properly designed, these measures can help to improve pupil achievement by focusing instruction on essential skills and concepts and by encouraging students to stay in school through graduation (see below) and thereby to become more proficient than if they became discouraged and dropped out. Systems that use more than one kind of evidence to evaluate student achievement tend to provide a more valid basis for drawing inferences because additional information is available. However, in the case of students with special learning or language needs, it is important that the measures be designed or evidence be selected to support valid inferences for these students. I return to this point in Section 3.

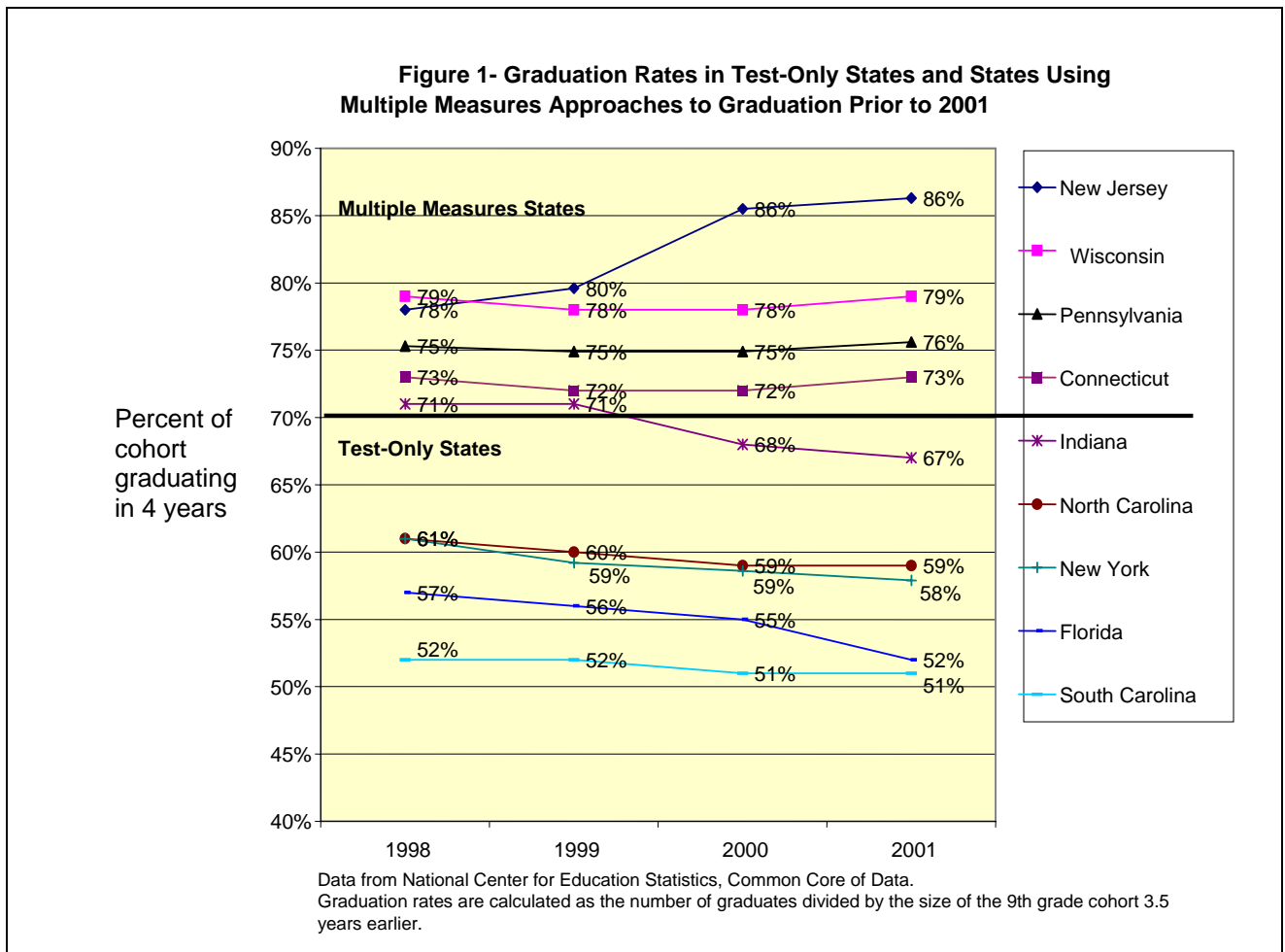
II. Supporting Achievement while Increasing Graduation Rates

An important state goal is increasing student achievement for all students, not just for those who are already well-supported in school. The state benefits from an educated citizenry and workforce that can enter the labor market productively and is harmed by high rates of dropping out, which reduce the ability of young people to enter the labor market, reduce their wage levels when they can get jobs, and increase crime and incarceration rates. By one estimate, California's current rate of dropping out (about 66,000 students annually) costs the state nearly \$19 billion each year. Based on studies nationally, that number can be expected to increase significantly if an exit exam system is implemented in a fashion that does not assess all students validly, provide adequate incentives for students to attempt to complete school, and target resources to students for intensified learning opportunities. Many studies have documented increases in dropout rates and decreases in graduation rates for states implementing exit exams, especially when the assessments systems have not included adequate alternatives.⁷

⁶ Center on Education Policy. *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*, Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy (2004); Darling Hammond et al., *Multiple Measures Approaches*; Johnson, D. R., & Thurlow, M. L. (2003). *A national study on graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities* (Technical Report 36). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes; Krentz, J., Thurlow, M., Shyyan, V., & Scott, D. (2005). *Alternative routes to the standard diploma*. (Synthesis Report 54). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes

⁷ For recent studies examining the increases in dropout rates associated with high-stakes testing systems, see Advocates for Children (2002). *Pushing out at-risk students: An analysis of high school discharge figures -- a joint report by AFC and the Public Advocate*. Retrieved December 14, 2005 from:

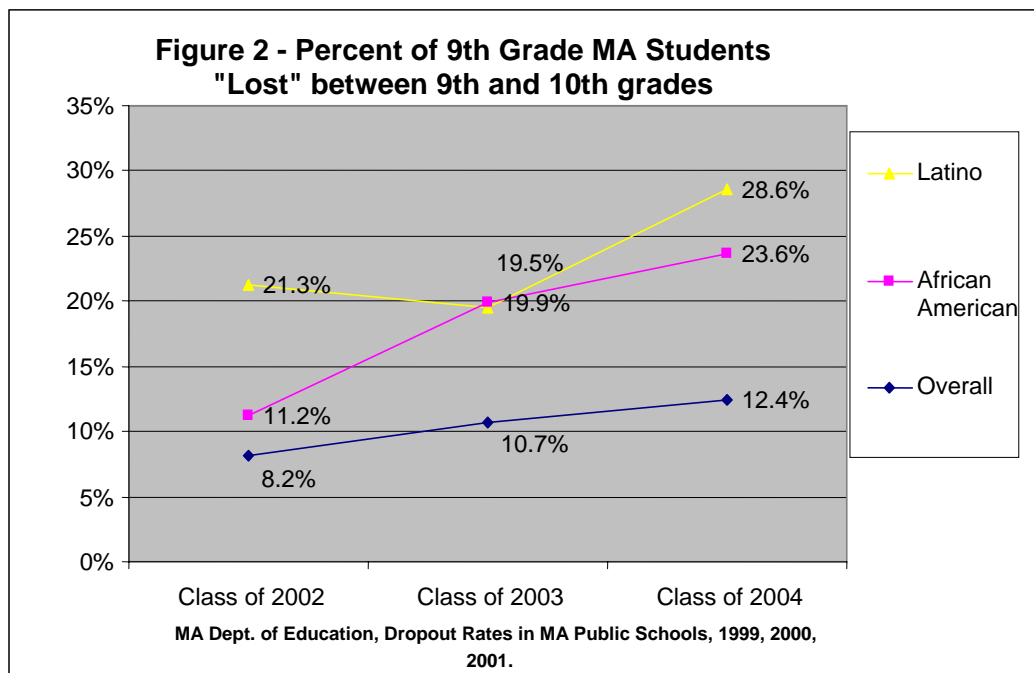
Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that, for states implementing exit exams in the 1990s, those with test-only systems were much more likely to experience declines in graduation rates than those with systems offering alternatives.



<http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/pushout-11-20-02.html>; W. Haney (2002). Lake Wobegone guaranteed: Misuse of test scores in Massachusetts, Part 1. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(24). Retrieved September 3, 2004 from: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n24/>; J. Heubert & R. Hauser (eds.) (1999). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation*. A report of the National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press; B.A. Jacob (2001). Getting tough? The impact of high school graduation exams. *Education and Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23 (2): 99-122; D. Lilliard, & P. DeCicca (2001). Higher standards, more dropouts? Evidence within and across time. *Economics of Education Review*, 20(5): 459-73; G. Orfield, D. Losen, J. Wald, & C.B. Swanson (2004). *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis*. Retrieved December 14, 2005 from: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410936>; M. Roderick, A.S. Bryk, B.A. Jacob, J.Q. Easton, & E. Allensworth (1999). *Ending social promotion: Results from the first two years*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research; R. Rumberger & K. Larson (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education*, 107: 1-35; E. Rustique-Forrester (in press). Accountability and the pressures to exclude: A cautionary tale from England. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*; A. Wheelock (2003). *School awards programs and accountability in Massachusetts*.

Among the test-only systems shown on the figure above, four of the five (Florida, Indiana, New York, and North Carolina) have since enacted non-test alternatives to complement the exit exam. The states with multiple measures systems for graduation maintained or increased their already higher graduation rates while also maintaining and improving rates of student achievement which are above the national average. Thus, they have been able to improve student achievement for a greater share of their student population, rather than showing improvements in average scores while losing large numbers of students from the education system.

At least two states (Massachusetts and Texas) have tied school rankings to exit exam scores in grade 10, as California does, which creates an incentive for schools to “lose” the lowest achieving students before or during the 10th grade. Both of these states have seen large increases in the rates of grade retention and dropout for 9th graders (such that they do not enter the 10th grade testing pool where their scores would be reported) and additional increases in rates of dropout for 10th graders who have failed the exam. As recent data from Massachusetts show, more students are disappearing between 9th and 10th grades and fewer dropouts are returning to school. (See Figure 2.) In some schools, students who seem unlikely to pass the exam or who do not pass the exit exam on their first or second try are not always encouraged to enlist in the additional services, but rather are encouraged to leave school to enroll in an alternative education program. Students themselves become discouraged after they have failed the exam, especially if they fail it multiple times, and if they have seen that other students like themselves are not passing. Either by personal decision or school encouragement, many students who fail are removed from the tested population and no longer affect the school or district’s accountability scores. Thus, the appearance of improvement is not necessarily accompanied by an overall increase in student achievement. For the state as a whole, more students may become less educated as they dropout earlier and with fewer skills.



As a matter of public policy, then, it is important for the exit examination system to function so as to encourage students to stay in school, improve their skills, and be committed to graduate. Achieving these goals appears to be enhanced by systems that provide valid assessments for all groups of students which provide them the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned and targeted instruction for those who need it.

III. Selecting Appropriate Alternatives

Each of the alternatives outlined earlier has strengths and limitations. For example, the use of alternative standardized tests can offset some of the unique limitations of a particular test, but may also fail to provide valid measures for some students with special needs who require more fundamental adaptations and may – if the tests are all similarly constructed, largely multiple-choice measures of learning – share some of the same limitations in measuring standards that require more open-ended demonstrations of knowledge and skills.

Local performance assessments that provide extensive evidence of student work (such as portfolios, exhibitions, and senior projects) have the strong advantage of supporting more ambitious instruction that can foster critical thinking and performance skills, increasing teachers' focus on standards and understanding of how to teach to standards, and offering rich evidence of student learning that can guide more focused teaching and learning. At the same time, a strong system of local performance assessments requires time to develop and investments in local capacity to develop, implement, and score assessments. Many states have found this investment well worth making and have reaped significant instructional benefits from their efforts. In California's case, this approach warrants consideration for a long-term investment. Some may worry in the short term, however, about the quality and comparability of locally developed assessments.

Given the goals that California's State Department of Education and legislature have expressed for the exit examination in this state, another strong alternative that should receive serious consideration would be a set of state-developed performance assessments linked to the state learning standards that can be administered and scored locally using state-established standards and rubrics. This approach, which has been adopted in Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey, among other states, has the virtue of providing tasks that are comparable and clearly linked to state standards that are also responsive to different learning approaches. Such an approach can also support local learning about how to develop strong performance assessments by providing solid models of standards-based assessment.

New Jersey's strategy, which has been in effect for many years, is worthy of particular note, as it requires districts to provide remedial coursework targeted to students' identified skill needs as well as performance assessment alternatives to students who fail the exit exam. Thus, the system promotes focused learning opportunities around the standards. The performance tasks clearly reflect the standards and are mapped to the exit exam. They provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and maintain student effort, engagement, and learning. New Jersey is one of the

few exit examination states that has both increased its graduation rates, which are among the highest in the nation (see figure 1), and has high and increasing student achievement in reading and mathematics. Thus, its strategy appears to have both raised standards without pushing students out of school. (New Jersey allows additional targeted alternatives for some students with disabilities who cannot be validly assessed by the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) or the Special Review Assessment (SRA)).

Performance tasks that might be used in California could include a set of discrete tasks representing specific standards as in New Jersey, a more integrated assessment such as a senior project that evaluates multiple standards in one larger task, as in Pennsylvania, or a collection of student work samples developed to demonstrate specific skills and scored using state standards, as in Washington and Oregon. Any of these approaches could be constructed to ensure the assessment of equivalent or higher skill levels in standards domains. At the current moment, it may be easiest to imagine the feasibility of implementing the first approach statewide. It seems most reasonable to recommend that the state immediately examine the development and implementation of a statewide performance assessment alternative, building on the successful experiences of other states.

As a final alternative to consider, coursework standards have strong face validity as they provide multiple measures of student learning throughout a course of study, particularly if the courses are developed to cover and assess specific state standards. As suggested by the HumRRO report, specifically designed remedial courses targeted at the exit exam content could be used as a measure for meeting the graduation standard. This mirrors the New Jersey approach to targeted remedial coursework described above. HumRRO suggests such a course might be offered in the summer after senior year as an alternative for granting a diploma. There is no reason such a specially designed course could not also be offered before the end of the senior year rather than reserved only to the summer after the senior year. If a post-senior year alternative were to be considered, special efforts would need to be made to persuade discouraged students to participate, and significant costs for offering the course with qualified teachers using a strong curriculum would need to be borne by the state if all eligible students were to gain access to the course and experience a viable learning opportunity.

Another coursework-based approach to raising and evaluating standards, used in a number of states, is one tied to specific high school courses that meet state standards. This approach is implicit in California's approval of courses to meet A-G requirements. Passage of the specific English language arts and mathematics courses approved by the state (through the A-G process) at the grade levels covered by the exit exam is another worthwhile strategy to consider as evidence of having met grade level requirements.

Whichever of these options might be adopted, knowledge about the range of needs of special education students, the requirements of IDEA, testing standards, and the experience of other states also suggest that, while many special needs students will be able to benefit from a well-constructed alternative assessment, additional alternatives for such students are likely to be required in line with their individualized education plans.

IV. The Current Challenge for 2005-06

In the long-run California should immediately begin developing a system of alternative assessments that will provide additional evidence about the students' knowledge and skills, in open-ended formats that allow students to show what they know with respect to the critical standards and skills targeted by the grade level competencies associated with the CAHSEE. As noted above, California may consider a state-developed performance assessment system, like those that other states have developed, administered by local districts using state standards and rubrics; a coursework option linked to state standards; or a local performance assessment option.

For the current year, because of the lateness in the policy cycle for California to consider and construct alternatives, it is likely that a short-term solution to the problems of invalid assessment will be needed for the 2005-06 school year.

The state should consider, as professional standards suggest, "other relevant information about students' knowledge and skills", including students' passage of the courses required by the state and the additional courses and requirements stipulated by local districts to receive a diploma.

There are other conceivable ways to strengthen the warrant about the quality of coursework students have experienced and the learning they have achieved within the next six months. These include allowing students who have passed A-G approved courses at the grade level expected by the exit exam (e.g. Algebra I and 9th or 10th grade English language arts) to receive a diploma; providing a special remedial course tied to the exit exam standards in the spring of 2006 as well as in the summer; or, as HumRRO suggested, allowing students who complete a Senior Project that incorporates the standards to graduate.

These worthwhile ideas, however, should not be attempted if the time-frame is too short to accomplish them smoothly, with quality, and without additional trauma to students and schools. Absent the ability to attain these conditions, the state should allow the granting of a local diploma to those who have fulfilled the state graduation requirements other than the exit examination, and offer a special state recognition on the diploma to students who have also passed the CAHSEE.